PHAN THI NHU BANG

TA THI KIEU

An heroic girl of Bentre

LIBERATION EDITIONS — SOUTH VIETNAM — 1966

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The heroine of the following story is an ordinary young woman of South Vietnam. Like many others, the peasant girl Ta Thi Kieu born Ly has taken to arms under the banner of the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation to fight for the independence and the reunification of her country, for the freedom and happiness of her people.

Having witnessed many odious crimes perpetrated by the aggressors and their lackeys, Ly has translated her profound hatred for the enemy into valorous acts. For her exploits she was conferred a Liberation Military Order, Third Class, and the glorious title of "Heroine of the South Vietnam Liberation Armed Forces" in May 1965.

In very simple words, Phan Thi Nhu Bang will tell you some episodes of the life and fight of this 27-year-old heroine.

LIBERATION EDITIONS

I

After planting her bundle of rice-seedlings, Ly straightened up and tried to muffle a yawn. She wiped her forehead with a corner of her scarf and picked up another bundle. Just as she was going to replant one seedling she was seized with dizziness ; the landscape blurred before her eyes. She put the seedlings back in the heap and sat down on the field dike. Fanning herself with her conical hat she again wiped her face with her scarf. She felt terribly tired.

Breathing with delight the fresh breeze which had just risen, she longed to have just a short rest before going on with the replanting but her eye-lids became as heavy as if big blocs of stone were weighing on them. Determinedly she washed her face with water from the field and flicked up the lock of hair hanging loose on her forehead.

But a few minutes later Ly became sleepy again. The sun was not too scorching and the wind was really bewitching, so no longer able to resist the temptation she looked round for a tree to sleep in its shade. No one was to be seen as far as the horizon ! Suddenly an idea flashed through her mind. She piled up the bundles of seedlings in two rows to get a free space in between. Putting her conical hat on top of them she smiled with content and slipped into the empty place, but before falling into a sound slumber she re-assured herself that nobody could see her from outside.

When she came back to her home it was about three o'clock in the morning. Everybody was sound asleep. She had to slip

in through a hole she had made in the earthern wall. Hardly had she shut her eyes when the cocks crowed, and she had to throw off her sleepiness and think of the work waiting for her. After hastily re-arranging her hair she went to the kitchen to prepare the meal for her family. After gobbling her own share down, she took her conical hat and hurried to the fields to finish the replanting of seedlings on time.

This hard life did not date from today. Ever since the general uprising a few months earlier Ly had not had a single moment for herself. Her time was entirely taken up by the resistance, the household and farm work.

A liaison agent, she had moreover to look after her hamlet, An Phong. She was on the move by day and by night. As for her household work, she would do it at night, sometimes going to sleep on her feet. If she wanted to devote herself to the resistance she had to get through her work at home so as not to displease her parents. She had also to do the ploughing and sowing at night despite her fear of finding herself alone among fields rendered ghostly by darkness and the cries of night birds. Seeing that she was overworking herself her parents often complained of her even scolded her, if only to make her take some rest.

Since the uprising the most bloodthirsty agents of the enemy had been liquidated one after another. During the day Ly would keep an eye on those who had escaped punishment. At night she would accompany the justice-seekers, quite unrecognizable in her disguise of a man's hat, shirt and trousers with a wooden rifle slung over her shoulder, save when she blushed if a friend took her for a boy and gave her a slap on the back. She also took part in plastering slogans on the walls or handing out leaflets. She was always present at meetings where, amidst gong and drum beats, the villagers demanded the implementation of the Geneva Agreements, the cessation of massacres, the abolition of terrorist measures and forcible conscription into the puppet army. Never did she return to her house before one or two o'clock in the morning.

Little wonder therefore that no sooner had she lain down on the ground among the bundle of seedlings then she fell into a sound slumber. Once she was sleeping soundly when her father, informed of her whereabouts, found her in her hideout. He looked at her for a moment, shaking his head, then pulled her hand.

"Get up, Ly !" he said. "Go home and sleep, if you feel like it. You are not a child any more, my girl !"

Waken up so suddenly, Ly rubbed her eyes with her scarf.

"I slept against my will," she said. "I only wanted to have a short rest, Dad".

At home she had to face her mother's scoldings.

"You are not a boy to go out every night," said the old woman. "Your brothers are working for the revolution, that's enough for our family. Your father and I, we're getting old. If something happens to you, we'll be very unhappy. Just think about it."

"But you are mistaken, Mum. I've done nothing at all."

"I am not blind. You are never seen at home. You go out every night. As soon as the mercenaries arrive, off you go again."

"That's right, but I just have to give a warning to our men. At night, I keep the watch on the road. We know this region like the palm of our hand so we have to help the cadres, haven't we, Dad ?"

Her father looked into her eyes for a moment.

"We never keep you from working for the revolution. But since the enemy is redoubling his terrorist measures, and you, my dear, are but a girl, your mother and I are afraid you won't be able to hold your tongue if you are arrested. If you talk, a lot of people will be caught, and that'll do grave harm to the revolution. We would like to see you remain a good citizen and work well as your contribution to the revolution."

"Don't trouble about it, Dad, I'd rather die than tell on our people."

Her mother was far from being convinced.

"But it is not so easy," she said. "Don't you see that even some of the veterans have had to talk because of the tortures? You are only a girl, and a slap is enough to make you loosen your tongue."

"No, never. I am not like those renegades," Ly replied.

Since her parents remained sceptical, Ly said loudly, nearly crying:

"You must believe me. Let them arrest me and you'll see for yourselves."

It was not Ly's intention to disobey her parents. She loved them tenderly, because despite their old age — both of them being in their seventies — they had not had a moment of peace, although they were held in esteem by the whole village.

Being landless peasants and having to keep a large family they had had to work as share-croppers. The debts they were forced to incur between two harvests to sustain the whole family reduced their gain almost to nothing. This poverty brought them untold humiliations and even ill treatments by the landlord. Once, because of five unpaid kegs of rice owed him as interest, the despot put Ly's father into a barrel and had it shaken violently.

Within seven years, Ly's four elder brothers had to hire themselves as servants to the rich families. Nam, her elder sister, and Ut, her young brother, and she herself stayed with their parents who could never make both ends meet. None of the children could afford schooling for long. Ly who went to school for a year only, hardly knew how to read and write.

It was during the Resistance that their life became easier when a plot of land was allotted them. Ly's elder brothers then either worked in various services of the Resistance or fought in the ranks of the People's Army. Cadres and armymen often came to her family's modest dwelling. These were the best years they had ever known.

After the re-establishment of peace, Sau and Chin, two of Ly's elder brothers, were regrouped to the North in keeping with the

provisions of the Geneva Agreements. Her other brothers, Tu and Tam, and her sister Nam got married. There remained only her parents, her young brother and herself, and the house became suddenly empty. Moreover, the atmosphere in the village became quite unbearable. Peace was on paper only. Repression was rampant, blood was shed more abundantly than ever, press-ganging became daily practice. In fact, the people had not enjoyed a single moment of peace. Enemy agents of all colours who had not dared to stay in the village during the Resistance now came back and rode roughshod. Mourning and humiliation again befell the villagers and under the weight of such apprehension more wrinkles appeared on the faces of Ly's parents.

Now grown, up, Ly took part in revolutionary activities. She wanted to spare her parents all concern about her. She did every thing at home so as to make life less hard for them, and even managed to put by some money so that Ut could go to school. Since her parents often talked about the two sons who had regrouped to the North, she told them :

"If we want them to come back soon we must drive the Yankees away. That's why I'm working with the partisans. Don't scold me if I go out frequently."

That, they knew was true, the poor old couple. But how could they help worrying about the lot of their daughter ?

Owing to her zeal, Ly was admitted to the People's Revolutionary Youth Union in April 1960, at the age of twenty two, before any of the other youths in An Phong.

She was quite afraid when Lo, the village secretary of the Union, came and talked to her about the matter. She felt her activities were too recent to make her worthy of being a member of an organization which was said to be an arm of the Party. She implored Lo to wait but he stuck to the point.

At the admission ceremony she experienced the greatest emotion of her life on finding herself in front of the glorious red banner of the Party. She had just enough strength to promise to do her best to accomplish all missions entrusted to her and betray nothing if she ever fell into the hands of the enemy.

Only two years had gone by since then and Ly could not help laughing when recalling her naivety at the beginning. If her memories were accurate people were then having a hard time. To avoid round-ups the partisans had to move to another locality while those who stayed back had to remain in underground hideouts. Two of them were protected by Ly's parents. Every day, her mother would bring them food, and when Ly wanted to do the work herself, she said :

"You are a girl. Better look after the household, and don't be curious."

From time to time other partisans came to have mysterious talks with the two underground militants. Each time Ly came in they lowered their voices and watched her with an inquisitive look. What chagrined Ly most that sometimes they even tried to avoid her. Her mother had to explain to her that the partisans were doing what her brothers had done before and that she need not worry about it.

Ly did not know exactly what her brothers had done. She only remembered that when she was nine she often saw young girls of eighteen or thereabout training themselves, together with her brothers, at shooting, hurling hand grenades, and even boxing. Greatly interested she told the girls :

"When I grow up I'll do the same thing."

"What for ?"

"To kill the mercenaries who come to steal our chickens."

The girls caressed her hair and said laughingly :

"When you grow up the mercenaries woud have all gone, my little sister."

Now she had grown up and the mercenaries were still there. Why could she not do what her elders had done ?

She was sixteen when her brothers went to the North. They told her to take their place at home, to take care of their parents and to follow their examples, avoiding all contacts with the criminal agents.

To tell the truth, she did not know exactly how to follow her brothers' examples. But the criminal agents, she knew whom they were: these were the mercenaries and the policemen who hung about in the village, beating and arresting people and taking everything they could lay hands on. They also tried to arrest the partisans. Sure, Ly would not make acquaintances with them because she abhorred them.

Some time after her brothers' departure to the North these cruel men for no reason beat to death a peasant in Thanh Tan. The people in nearby villages demonstrated en masse to demand that the Geneva Agreements be respected and the family of the victim compensated. The demonstrators marched over two and a half kilometres to the beating of drums and gongs with the body of the victim at their head.

Leaving their cows in the fields, Ly, her brother Ut and five other cow-herds followed the demonstrators. They took turns in beating the drums and chanted slogans until their voices became hoarse.

But the mercenaries who were sent to disperse the demonstrators, showered blows on the seven children and took them all to Mo Cay in their cars, swearing all the time:

"Dirty little bastards! Dirty little Vietcong! You'll go to prison, the whole lot of you!"

Ly and her mates shouted and cried, asking to go home. They were shut together with several other demonstrators in a cell where they went on crying at the top of their voices. Ly told the guards that her friends and she were grazing their cows when they were taken away. Not knowing what to do the guards had to set the children free.

Back home, Ly and her young brother received a good scolding from their parents, which only increased the girl's resentment against the enemy. This aversion became profound hatred when three mercenaries raped a young cousin of Ly, who was only twelve years old, and when four others ravished Ba, a young neighbour, whose husband happened to be away from home.

Both had to keep their beds for months. Each time Ly met her cousin she felt pity and rage mount to her throat. She bit her lips and swore that she would kill all these criminals.

She wanted to do what her elders had done. But where to begin ? The cadres were obviously avoiding her... She could not understand it. Did they suspect her ? It would be better to tell her openly. One day, unable to contain herself any longer, Ly told her mother :

"If they go on like this, I am not going to warn them any more of the mercenaries' arrival".

"Don't talk nonsense," the mother said.

"That's what I'll do if they continue to avoid me."

However, Ly continued to warn the militants whenever the mercenaries came to the village. Her information was always detailed : how many men there were, how they were equipped, whether there were some cruel agents among them...

She did this, because she had a great affection for the partisans. Seeing them endure innumerable privations and looking at their meagre bodies, their pale complexion and their sunken eyes, she cried for them at the bottom of her heart. Whenever she had some money to spare after hiring herself out as a servant, she would buy them some food, a towel or a pair of pants. Little by little the cadres avoided her less and less. Their looks became more friendly, but still they did not let her into their secrets.

In 1958, a great number of militants were arrested and many sympathizers were terrorised. Ly's parents, however, were not scared. Unhappy at not being entrusted with any mission, Ly went to fetch the cadres.

"Why don't you trust me ? If you take me for an enemy spy, better kill me rather than keep me away from all your activities."

They scrutinized her for a moment, then said :

"No, no suspicion of that kind."

"Why then do you avoid me and not give me any job ?"

"But it is very dangerous, child. Later when you grow up!"

"But I'm grown up now! I'm twenty. During the resistance, I saw girls of the same age who fought very well. I can do what they did. Just let me try and you'll see, uncles."

"You don't understand what we mean. The present situation is very complicated. We are living under terrorism. The least carelessness may lead to your arrest or even your death."

"But I'll be on my guard."

"But can you hold your tongue if you are arrested? Can you keep yourself from giving away any information to them?"

"Information? About whom? About what? I don't understand."

"Well, about us, for example."

Ly shook her head resolutely.

"Never in my life, would I endanger your lives. If you are arrested, who'll look after the people?"

Seeing her determination, the partisans promised to entrust her with some work. Ly was overjoyed, yet could not help feeling great anxiety. What if she failed to accomplish her task?

One day the cadres asked her:

"Let's see. What do you want to do?"

"I'll do whatever you want me to."

"To carry out the revolution, is that what you want?

"To carry out the revolution?" Ly hastily made a sign of refusal. "That's beyond my power. Give me something simple to do."

"It was you who insisted. Now you are asked to carry out the revolution and again it's you who refuse. What do you really want then?"

"I want to do anything and with you. As for carrying out the revolution, it's beyond my capacity."

"Well, you take charge of the liaison. When there is a letter to be delivered or somebody to meet, we shall fetch you. All right?"

"I can't take charge of the liaison, but I can deliver your letters and tell other people to come."

Her answer gave rise to peals of laughter from the cadres, without Ly knowing why.

From that day on, she fulfilled any task entrusted to her, redoubling her zeal in the hope of being able to take charge of the liaison and to take part in revolutionary activities. She even agreed to stand guard while the cadres were meeting. It was only later that she knew the nature of her work. The scope of her activities was gradually extended to several villages and her devotion led to her being charged with leading her hamlet.

By the end of 1959 the enemy planned to build an airstrip some 300 metres from Ly's home. A regular company of the 7th Division was sent to occupy the place. The troops set up barbed wire fences around the fields without caring to warn the owners. Bulldozers uprooted the crops to level the ground amidst the cries of the dispossessed peasants. Ly racked her brain to think of some way of foiling the enemy's plan. The construction of the airstrip would bring added misery and tribulations to the local population.

The rigorous control which the enemy would not fail to establish would render revolutionary activities more difficult. Where would the cadres find shelter and food? When Ly went to the partisans and asked for their advice, they told her to organize a mass struggle.

"It's very difficult," Ly answered. "What's more, I'm too young to be able to convince the villagers. I don't know what to tell them."

"The only thing you need is patience. Tell them the plain truth as you know it. Use simple words. Tell them what harm this will do you, and them. They will understand you easily."

Ly began persuading some of the young peasants and their parents that a petition had to be lodged with the authorities to

demand the abandonment of the construction of the airstrip, or at least to compensate the peasants for their confiscated land. Finding the demand reasonable the mercenaries had to take the petition to the provincial puppet authorities.

Ly broke the good news to the villagers and added :

"We should lodge more petitions to force them to accept our other demands."

If a person showed sign of fear she would reassure him or her :

"If everybody does the same thing the authorities cannot do anything against you. We are only demanding that our fields be returned to us. Is there anything blame worthy about that ?

She called on the families of those mercenaries whose fields were also devastated.

"Your son is in the army. They must not grab your fields. You must protest to the authorities."

She told them what to tell the soldiers in charge of the construction of the airstrip :

"Our sons are in the army like you. How can the government grab our land ? Has it no regard for those who are living in misery due to the absence of their sons ? Everytime we meet you, we think of our own kids. Maybe one of them is being used right at this moment to do the same thing in one of your villages. How comes it that you and our sons are trying to do harm to one another's families ?"

Those words strongly influenced the mercenaries, a score of whom later deserted while the rest became less hard-hearted. Ly was praised for having done good agitation work and was admitted to the People's Revolutionary Youth Union.

Each time she met those cadres who had hidden themselves in her house two years before they would ask her laughingly :

"Well, dare you carry out the revolution and take charge of the liaison now ?"

And Ly blushed with confusion.

II

The political struggle gained in scope with every passing day. Ly was successively elected to the leadership of her hamlet, then of the commune. She was often criticized for putting too much stress on armed struggle. But she could not just content herself with demonstrations when she saw the mercenaries sow terror with impunity.

Once Ly and a hundred other women picketed an enemy post in Thom market, each carrying empty baskets hung on a bamboo shoulder pole as if they were going to have their rice unhusked at a nearby rice mill. As Phong, the commander of the post, was absent, the guards promised to hand him the petition when he came back. There were only a score of mercenaries at the post and Tam Den, the notorious blood-thirsty hangman, was among them. The women recognized the mercenaries as the ones who had often come to plunder their village.

After handing in the petition, they had nothing else to do but to return. But, seeing the small number of mercenaries, Ly wanted to mount a surprise attack. She would take charge of Tam Den while her campanions would attack the rest four against one, and the scheme could be carried out in the twinkle of an eye. She told her companions of her plan but the latter found it too adventurous.

"We've already had a success because the petition is accepted. We should not act too recklessly."

All the way home Ly walked in silence apart from the other women, unable to hide her discontent. At the meeting the cadres agreed with the other women that the demonstration had been a success.

"I don't agree with you," Ly protested. "We were far more numerous, and each of us had a pole in our hands. How can you speak of success when none of the mercenaries was killed ?"

Bay, the secretary of the Party cell, criticized her :

"This is a political struggle. You always think of armed struggle only."

"I accept your criticism but I'm not convinced. Aren't we allowed to kill even such a cruel agent as Tam Den ?"

"You will understand it later", said Bay thoughtfully.

"But don't take any risky action. At least not until there's a new order."

Ly had many difficulties at the beginning of her agitation work among the women folks. Most of them were very poor and had large families. They could not devote much time to the common struggle. Once, a child fell into a pond while his mother was away on a demonstration. The child was saved but Bay Hoa, the father, was furious with his wife. Such incidents were likely to cool off the zeal of the women, and Ly was greatly worried.

She told herself : "We struggle to demand democratic rights and day-to-day interests. Therefore we must defend what the demonstrators already have, otherwise nobody will have the heart to follow us. In each demonstration one runs the risk of being arrested and detained for days."

Perplexed, she went to Bay to tell him her thoughts. But he told her that everywhere people were meeting the same problem, and after a long discussion Ly proposed to use her hamlet for testing their ideas.

She pursuaded her friends to form a mutual-aid group and to exchange their services. At first they hesitated, arguing that this would only make things more complicated.

"Let each of us steer her own boat provided that everything will be all right."

Ly had to explain to them patiently what they would gain with such a group. Their farm work would be done in time even if they were absent ; apart from the advantage of unity in the struggle they would be able to foil all enemy's schemes and to overcome poverty in everyday life.

The success of the first mutual-aid group encouraged the setting up of many others. Things turned out so well that before each demonstration Ly could assign such and such people to stay at home to look after the children, the house work, the pigs and

chichken, etc. Next time it was their turn to join the demonstrations. Thanks to these measures the political struggle went on developing without major difficulties in An Phong hamlet which was later cited as a good example for the whole village.

After this success the Party cell entrusted Ly with the organization of the work in An Binh hamlet which, like An Phong, lies along the Ben Tre — Tra Vinh highway running across the whole region.

As the revolution developed, Ly was able to set up a network of underground self-defence units whose members were chosen from among the youth who had distinguished themselves during the demonstrations. The first group comprised four boys and five girls who had all been her friends in the days they grazed their cows together. Whenever she had a free moment she would help the poorest families till their fields, remove the weeds or make fertilizer. She considered this revolutionary work and gave all her heart to it. While working together with her friends she would explain to them the cause of their misery and the crimes perpetrated by the enemy. She told them that there was no other course to follow but to struggle.

She fetched from the village tailors all the left-over pieces of cloth with which she made pants and shirts for the children of poor families and would spend her money on a pair of trousers or a shirt for her poorest friends. Once she saved up three thousand piastres (South Vietnam currency) and bought a necklace and a pair of earings as a wedding gift for her young brother's bride, but the sight of her friends' misery made her change her mind. She resold the necklace and gave each of her friends a small sum of money. Her mother was not pleased at this, but her friends all broke into tears on receiving the little gift. They wanted to thank her, but "No thanks, please," she said. "It is natural that the poor should help one another."

Having won the esteem and confidence of the villagers, Ly gave the best of them an easy task to do : to signal the arrival of a patrol and to keep an eye on the local enemy agents. Later

she used them for keeping watch on the road, acting as scouts for the partisans, handing out leaflets, plastering posters, or even serving warnings on the enemy agents.

But, worried by the continuous absence of their children, the women would come and complain to Ly :

"My daughter is not so careful as you," said one of them.

"If she were a boy, I wouldn't care ; but you must understand, I'm really afraid that she'll turn out a bad girl, going out every evening. Can you spare her for me ? If ever you are in need of money to run your organization, I can help you, but do me a favour and don't assign any more night work to my daughter."

"I can't sleep at all because of my kid's absence," said another.

"I won't bargain with you about my trouble," added a third, "but about my girl, I'm really anxious."

They also told her about other subjects for anxiety which were after all only the same she herself had heard from her own parents. They, too, were afraid that Ly might turn bad or be arrested, and her aunt even wanted to marry her to her husband's nephew.

"I will not get married before my brothers come back," she replied. "We shall have to wait until then."

To the mother, the aunt whispered :

"It's not right to let her go out every night, and what's more, with young men ! I warn you that she'll come to no good !"

Her mother felt all the more unhappy, above all at seeing her grow pale and lose weight. She sent some one to keep an eye on her. Ly suffered a great deal from being suspected by her own mother and she spent whole nights weeping. But, thinking of her brothers, of the promises she had made the day she was admitted to the Youth Union and of the enemy's crimes, she regained courage.

"You'd better trust me," said she to her parents.

"Never will I tarnish our family honour, and anyway, I've got my own dignity, too !"

"You are our daughter," said the weeping mother, "and yet you do not listen to us !"

"Listening to the Revolution means listening to you. I should do great wrong to the people and to you if I gave up our cause."

In spite of their opposition, Ly knew well that her parents themselves cherished tender affection for the cadres. During those difficult times, they ran all sorts of risks in helping them and giving them shelter.

Now that her friends' parents had also expressed the same fears, Ly decided that she had to gain their confidence, otherwise the work might not run well. She could, anyway, come and help her friends with their household work in order to give them more free time, but in case she might make a false step, there was nothing to do but try to persuade the parents.

"Don't be afraid," she said to them. "We are not so foolish as to stain our face with mud. We won't do anything that can harm the affection we have from you and make us the objects of anyone's disdain. If we did, whom should we live with ? We are closely bound to one another, we shall help one another. I give you my word that nothing bad will happen. The whole responsibility I shall shoulder."

These promises, in some way, set their mind at rest.

"Well," said they, "we trust you. Take good care of our children for we are very anxious."

By assuming such a dangerous responsibility Ly herself felt as if she were sitting on burning coals.

She told her friends frankly :

"Your parents are afraid we shan't behave correctly, and I had to promise them that we'd behave well. We must keep ourselves from any sort of misconduct, otherwise I shall kill myself for I couldn't stand our parents' reproaches. Should any of us behave badly, we would all be tarred with the same brush. If we lose our parents' confidence, we can no longer work for the revolution and the movement will go downhill. That will be an unpardonable blow toward the revolution."

Her friends re-assured her :

"Don't worry. We know how to behave ourselves."

"As for me, only after the reunification will I get married. Can you, Ly, make such a promise, too ?"

Ly smiled, casting an affectionate and trustful look at her friends.

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* *

Two enemy agents were discovered in An Phong : Tam Cung, a man, and Ba Phuoc, a woman. After warning them fruitlessly, the Party cell decided to liquidate them.

Ly gave much thought to this case. They had been poor people who owned next to nothing and she felt that it was their poverty that had pushed them over to the enemy. "If we came and showed them the truth and helped them live better, they couldn't fail to join us," she told herself. So, she asked the Party cell to postpone the execution and was herself given the task of re-educating the two concerned.

Ly came to see them and handled the matter so well that after some time, both Tam Cung and Ba Phuoc agreed to make a public confession and to ask for the people's forgiveness. Ly asked for them each a plot of land so that they could live honestly. There were, however, objections.

"It hasn't been possible to distribute the land even to everyone of our folks," said one villager. "How can we think of those who have worked for the enemy before others ? and where can we get the land for them now ? What shall we tell the people if there are complaints ?"

"But the poor among us have our people behind them," explained Ly.

"We can help in one way or another whereas Tam Cung and Ba Phuoc who are held in esteem, cannot live eiheir without resources. They would only have to take the wrong path again

and seek for subsistence from the enemy. As for the land to be distributed, don't trouble about it, I can persuade some people to give them some."

Having got the authorization from hed superiors, Ly went to see Xuan, a poor peasant who had just been allotted two hectares, thanks to which he could now lead a relatively easy life. She led him to think of those who were poorer than himself by reminding him of his own poverty in the past. Xuan was at first willing to offer a quarter of his share, but flatly refused when he knew that it was for the two former agents. Ly had to explain again the necessity to help these people rebuild their lives for they were in the same boat as the other poor.

Tam Cung and Ba Phuoc cried their eyes out the day they received their plots of land :

"We deserve death and yet the people and the Front, instead of punishing us, give us these plots. Never shall we forget this kindness. Never shall we relapse into our old errors."

The affair created quite a sensation in the whole village. Many other agents came and joined the people's ranks. Some time later Tam Cung and Ba Phuoc implored Ly to assign them some revolutionary work so that they could redeem their faults. Gradually, they both became devoted sympathizers.

III

... The chief of the An Phong post was a certain Phong whose cruelty and treachery were notorious. Guilty of various crimes, arrests, tortures and even mass executions, this butcher used to prowl around for a chance to extort money from the people by a thousand and one tricks.

His son, Hon by name, was no less vicious. A school-boy he worked already for the police. He sniffed here and there and came

to report all to his father. In this way, he had caused the death of two peasants at the time the mutual-aid groups were formed. He thought it his right to have any woman he wanted and if the victims resisted, she would be accused of being Viet Cong, and brought to the post where tortures of a worst kind awaited her.

Ly and her self-defence group wanted to do away with Hon. Bay, the Party cell secretary, criticized her :

"You think of nothing but armed struggle !"

Ly, however, thought that Hon's death would be velcomed by the whole population. She insisted so much that at last his execution was decided upon. But how to carry it out ? Someone suggested stretching a rope across the road and waiting till Hon passed by on his motor bike to tumble him down by suddenly pulling at the rope. Ly found the scheme none too sure as all would depend on the vehicle's speed, the performers' reflex and the strength of the rope. An abortive attempt would cost the population untold sufferings. She proposed another solution : that each should arm herself with a long bamboo stick and knock the bicycle over by throwing it into the wheel. Provided that there were a large enough number of people to ensure that at least one stick be thrust into the wheel, the plan must be a success.

Entrusted with this mission, Ly spent sleepless nights investigating suitable places, making the sticks and training herself. She was so anxious that sometimes she saw in her dream that the plan had fizzled out and woke up in a cold sweat.

One April evening in 1960, all preparations having been made, Ly went to the road with her friend Ngo and two lads, Lo and Buu, to wait for Hon.

When he came at full speed, one hand in this trousers' pocket, the other on the guiding bar, Buu, with one stroke, knocked down the motor bike with its rider who fell unconscious on the ground, a big wound on his head. Quickly, they tied his hands together and Lo and Buu brought their prisoner and his bike along while the girls stayed on the road to wipe off the traces and to advice the witnesses to keep silent.

The chief of the post was notified that his son had been caught and killed by the liberation armymen and it was not long before this news spread all over the region. Ly's parents who thought that she might have taken part in the execution of Hon, exhorted her to act with discretion.

"Work with the cadres, that we do want, but avoid at least those executions."

She had to resign herself to acquiescence.

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Hon's death did not suffice to serve as an example for other blood-hounds. Particularly ferocious was a group of militiamen under the command of Lin and his assistant Cong. They worked hand in glove like thieves in a fair but while multiplying their acts of money extortion they were violently jealous of each other. The chief Phong and the police officer Nang had promised them rewards for each exploit so that they should become all the more zealous. By forced-labour conscription, arrests, brutalities, threats, reprisals against former resistance members and families of cadres regrouped to the North, etc., they strove their best to make the people's life unbearable.

Women and girls were in particular their main targets and the two had committed many rapes with impunity. Every two or three days they would make a round of the hamlet, committing wrongs at every steps. Ly proposed to liquidate at least one of them and was again entrusted with the operation.

In order to gain their confidence, Ly pretended to have married a police officer in Saigon. Taking her for one of their ilk, they held her in good regards. One day, Ly went so far as to say to the Chief Phong :

"My husband is working in the police in Saigon. So I am very much afraid that the Viet Cong may take reprisals. If they prepare anything of the sort, would you be so kind as to warn me, uncle ?

The hangman, very delighted to be called "uncle" and to be someone's protector, promised her his help.

Lin and Cong often came to visit her and it was not long before she knew their enmity for each other. She decided to pit them further, the one against the other. So one day she whispered to Lin :

"You are the chief of the group, but have you perceived anything ? I come to know that Cong has gained the favour of the Chief Phong and the police officer Nang and this, at your expense. I've learnt that... but that's enough... if you do not hold your tongue I'll run a big risk telling you this secret."

"Tell me everything, I beg you ! I'll never tell anyone that it is you who have given me this information."

Only after much entreaty did Ly say :

"I say this to you out of frank friendship, but don't repeat it to anybody, The Chief Phong intends to replace you by Cong. I myself find it an injustice. Besides, Cong isn't a man of this locality, he comes from another district. You, at least, are a native. We here are not all good-for-nothings ! After this you'll feel wretched !"

"Is that true ?" asked Lin losing his temper.

"Exactly as I tell you ! You know well that never do I joke."

"Well, then. Think for yourself whether I've shown much zeal or not. I've never sulked when asked to do any job. Conscriptions, arrests, inspections, patrols, I did everything as best I could ! What more do they want from me ?

"What you say is true, but that's how they trust you !"

The brute clenched his teeth :

"You are righ ! For some time now this hound Cong has been putting on airs before me. Tell me, sister, can you help me to get rid of him ? He has got in my way, the bastard !"

"Oh, no ! no !" she hastened to say. "Do what you want to square your accounts, but I don't want to be mixed up in it. My husband isn't like the others, it wouldn't please him."

"She paused a while before going on :

"But you, you are the chief of your group, why then trouble about it ? Just send him home to Giong Trom or denounce him as a protector of the Viet Cong and then he'll be smashed."

"That won't do," replied Lin after some consideration. "It needs the assent of the Chief Phong and the police officer Nang to transfer him. As for claiming that he protects the Viet Cong, they will never believe me."

She assumed an air of compassion :

"That's bad luck, poor boy. I didn't know that it's so complicated."

Lin took leave of her with a sinking heart, not knowing which measures to take though Ly promised to report him anything she could learn. After the talk, she realized that it was possible to goad these two into killing each other. The Party comrades told her to be careful so that there could be no reprisals against her parents.

On June 16th, while her parents and brother were all out, Lin, Cong and two other civil guards came to her house all the worse for drink.

"How are you, my sister ?" asked Lin in a clammy voice.

"We have come to you for a drink !"

"But I have not a drop of alcohol at home," replied Ly, "and then you are all somewhat drunk, aren't you ? The government has forbidden you civil guards to drink when on duty, don't you know that ?"

"But man needs alcohol to drown his sorrow, my sister," said Lin sadly.

As Cong had flung himself down onto a wooden bed and was snoring, Ly took out twenty piastres and handed them to Lin :

"It's quite heart-breaking to see you so sad. Take all I've got left to pay for your drinks. We have prepared some pickled onions which can go with your wine, but don't forget to give me back my money so that I can prepare another lot of onions."

Lin ordered one of his men to go and fetch some alcohol. Winking at Lin, Ly said :

"Go over there to the verandah, Lin, I've something to tell you !"

Startled, Lin went out with the girl.

"What's the matter, sister ?"

She signed to him to lower his voice.

"I had rather tell you another time. You can't stand on your feet now."

"It's all right. I'm still far from tipsy. I can understand all."

"But can you promise me to keep secret ?"

"I swear it upon my life".

"Well ! Remember that ! As for me, if they question me, I'll deny everything. The Chief Phong who considers me as a member of his family, has told me repeatedly not to let out his secrets. He has made a decision to appoint Cong as chief of the group. Cong has poisoned his mind so much he suspects you of having sympathy with the Viet Cong and has put you under close surveillance."

Lin turned pale at hearing these words and muttered a string of curses before bawling out .

"I'll kill him like a dog ! Otherwise, it's I who'll die !"

Ly begged him not to get into such a rage and to be careful about his words.

"I'm not a coward," said Lin. "I always do what I say."

"But how will you manage it ?"

"I'll force him to drink. When he is dead-drunk, I'll shoot him right in the heart and say that he's committed suicide."

"That doesn't sound likely. It wouldn't have been possible for him to kill himself by shooting a bullet right in his own heart," replied Ly who was afraid that Lin might miss his rival. "You had better shatter his jaw from below and say that he pressed the trigger after putting the barrel under his chin, they will believe."

Lin nodded assent and begged her to act as a witness.

But the girl hastened to refuse :

"No ! No ! That's impossible ! Count me out of all that !

Do as you want but take care that nothing can happen to my parents, or my husband will not spare you !"

When the guard brought the alcohol in, Lin woke Cong up and helped him with one gulp after another. When Cong was completely drunk, Lin said to the guards :

"I'm going to kill Cong. Just obey my every word or I will do the same to you. At the inquiry, you will say that he's killed himself. Is that clear ?"

The frightened militiamen could only obey.

Lin began by striking at his rival's head. Too drunk to parry, Cong only cried out :

"Stop that kind of joke, damn you !"

Lin yelled, grinding his teeth :

"Yea..., you may think it's just a joke, you dirty son of a bitch."

Fearing he would kill his rival under her roof, Ly stopped him short :

"You may not kill him here ! My husband will put you all in jail. Get away and do your business out of here !"

She pulled Cong by the legs half a score of metres from her house. The guards flung themselves upon him and Lin killed him with a shot right through the jaw as Ly had told him. The hangman's brains were spattered by the shot and the ground reddened with blood. Ly, evercoming her repulsion, asked the guards to wipe off every sign of their presence in her home and to put everything back in order. After that she took her bicycle to go and inform her parents who were attending an anniversary meal at a relative's. The old couple were frightened but she reassured them :

"Don't worry, I swear that nohing will happen."

Then she went to find the chief Phong in Thom market.

The latter set out in no time with a patrol group. To their queries, Ly only replied :

"I was in the fields grazing the cows when I heard a shot. I hurried home and found Cong there, his brains scattered around. I know nothing else."

They suspected the militiamen had been drinking in her house, but found no traces of entertainment there at all. Some gendarmes sent from Mo Cay, however, arrested her. But at the district she told them :

"By the way I dared not say the truth in front of those militiamen who I feared would take reprisals. But I saw with my own eyes that they had been quarrelling among themselves, then Cong was killed by a shot. That's no suicide."

The gendarmes released her in the afternoon for there was no evidence against her. On the contrary, they arrested Lin.

To kill one jailer and have another arrested ! The affair had been so well handled and Ly was overcome with joy. She regretted, however, that the dead man's family lived as far away as in Giong Trom, otherwise it would have been possible to make them come to the post and ask for compensations.

Ly's parents who knew the truth said to her in tears :

"If you go on like that, we shall all be put in jail one day. You don't love us enough to listen to us ?"

"It's just because I love you that I've done this. Because it will hasten my brother's return and relieve our compatriots of so much suffering. I've done absolutely nothing you can blame me for."

Ly grieved deeply to have caused so much anxiety to her parents, but how could she help it ?

Lin was released a fortnight later. He thanked Ly profusely when he met her at the market, attributing to her the merit of not having denounced him in Mo Cay, which accounted for his early release. He paid her fifty piastres for the food and wine

he owed her the other day, and informed her that Phong was letting him continue in command of his squad. Ly was inwardly furious, wondering why they had liberated him.

In fact, like a horse accustomed to its old path, Lin resumed his old habits and continued to terrorize the people. Every night, he brought his men to make a round of the villages. Ly proposed that an ambush be laid for him after she had personally gone to each family of the puppet soldiers to persuade them to urge their return because, she said, the liberation forces were present everywhere and the life of their sons was hanging only by a thread.

Ly was charged with commanding the attack.

"No," she said, "I don't know the art of command. But I know the habits of the enemy. If they fall into the trap exactly as we expect, I'll tell you to fire, otherwise I'll tell you to withdraw, that's all I can do."

The only weapons the guerillas had were a few old "Lebels", two home-made grenades which had been buried for years so that nobody could tell whether they were still usable, and two sabres. They gave Ly a rifle, but not very confident in her skill, she handed it to one of the other comrades. Neither did she accept a grenade or a sabre, so in the end she went to the fight with her bare hands. She agreed however to collect the weapons of any enemies they killed.

At 21 hours, the patrol made its appearance. It was composed of nine men including Lin. When they were a few paces from the ambush, Ly gave the order to attack. Lin was killed on the spot but the other mercenaries threw themselves into a ditch on the other side of the road. The two grenades thrown among them failed to explode. A "Lebel" refused to function, so that after a moment Ly gave the order of withdrawal. The victory was not complete and Ly never ceased to regret the opportunity because of the bad condition of the arms.

Next morning, Lin's family went to the post to ask compensations for the death of their son. Other families followed suit and demanded that their sons be returned to them. Phong, the chief of the post, snarled :

"What compensation are you claiming ? It was the Viet Cong who killed him, not we ! Go and claim it from the Viet Cong themselves !"

"We don't know who killed him. But he was in your service, you are responsible for his death," one member of Lin's family retorted.

Others added :

"Give back our sons. You took them into the army, they will all be killed !"

Afterwards, three militiamen quitted their unit.

Ly went from house to house to explain to the people why they had to urge the return of their sons and in the meantime, to advise the latter to be reasonable if they did not want to share the fate of Hon and Lin.

* * *

However since the death of his son, Phong, the chief of post, had become more ferocious, as much to make a show of zeal as to avenge him. Ly and her comrades decided to get rid of him.

Periodically Phong went from Mo Cay to report to the district head and receive his instructions. This time Ly was again charged with commanding the expedition. She took care to post guards on the road at either end of the place of ambush to warn against the unexpected arrival of troops.

As was expected, Phong arrived with eight men squeezed in three pedicabs. He sat with the cashier Hanh and a militiaman in the second cab. Ly gave the order of attack and herself tossed a few grenades. The cab in which Phong was riding was overturned into the river, the militiamen was killed and the cashier

seriously wounded. But what became of Phong, nobody could tell ! He might have been blown to pieces, some concluded.

The other militiamen took to their heels while haphazardly firing their machine-gun. Ly gave the order of withdrawal, then went to the house of a sympathizer to change. She took a conical hat, disguised herself as a peaceful housewife going to market and came back to the place of the ambush.

She found the hangman Phong coming out of the pedicab box-seat holding a pistol and trembling. His tall and skinny body bent double, he moved cautiously step by step, looking all around in apparent fright. Ly shivered, not with fear but with fury and regret. It would have been much better if he had died in the place of the militiaman ! But she had to play out the comedy.

"Heavens !" she exclaimed. "It is you, uncle Phong ? Where did you come from ?"

"From the box-seat there !" the man replied, still trembling in all his limbs. "Where are you going, girl ?"

"Back from the market. On hearing the gun shots I was scared out of my wits — Look, I'm still trembling — I took shelter in the bush there. What's the matter with you ? Where are your militiamen ?"

"The bastards !" Phong growled. "They only thought of saving their skins'."

Ly cast a quick glance around and said :

"You really were very lucky ! To come out unharmed after an attack by the liberation forces is a thing unheard of !"

"It was thanks to the box-seat. Otherwise I would have been done for !"

No militiaman could be seen for miles around. Ly stood alone before Phong with the body of the killed militiaman as the only witness. Phong was only a shrimp of a man and moreover was scared. Should she seize the opportunity to finish him off ? But what about the pistol he held in his hand ? What if he fired

before she could knock him down ? Ly bitterly regretted that she did not know some elementary principles of boxing. She was still absorbed in her thoughts when the mercenaries arrived from Mo Cay. Swallowing her anger she took leave and walked away.

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She made up her mind to learn boxing. One day, a cousin of hers named Ro called upon her together with some other young men. The conversation turned on Khmer boxing.

Ro told her how he had learnt it in Tra Vinh when he was a bus driver. Ly had heard that the Khmers were famous for boxing. Greatly interested, she told her cousin :

"I want so much to learn boxing, Ro."

"But what are you going to do with it ?" Ro asked with a smile.

"Just to know it."

"Well, for men that's no wonder. But for you women ! Will you use it against your future husband ?"

"The joke provoked general laughter. Ly blushed with confusion but thinking of Phong and the militiamen who often came to her house and left their arms in all the corners she tried to overcome her shyness and asked :

"Can your boxing kill a man ?"

"Why not ! One or two punches are enough to drive his soul out of him ! Make it three if you are not very strong."

"Is it difficult ? How long does it take ?"

"Two or three days. The essential thing is to have the passion for boxing !"

Ly could not contain her joy.

"Then, teach me boxing, Ro !"

"Well, aren't you joking ?"

"No, I mean it seriously."

Ro smiled teasingly.

"I can help you. But when shall we begin ?"

"This very day, if you don't mind."

"All right. But you must first of all kill a chicken to offer the God of Boxing."

"Teach me first, and we'll procure the sacrifice later."

Ro made a gesture of disapproval :

"Don't joke such things. Without a sacrifice, no question of knowing the secrets of boxing."

"But I have no chicken !"

"We may substitute it by a few bottles of good beer !"

Ro winked significantly at his mates. Ly who did not notice him, ran to buy a big bottle of beer. Ro put it in a ceremonious manner in the middle of the table,. joined his hands and muttered some inintelligible prayers to the God of Boxing. Then he took a long draught.

"Now the ceremony is over," he said turning to Ly. "I have prayed to the God of Boxing to take you as a disciple. Let us begin right away. Do what I tell you to. Take great care, please."

Ro rolled up the sleeves of his jacket, bowed humbly before the altar, and muttered :

"My profound salutations to you, O God of Boxing !"

Ly hesitated, looking at the young men. Ro did not give her the chance to think :

"Go on, make haste ! You cannot learn boxing and be shy of it at the same time. Now, my profound salutations to you, O God of Boxing !"

Fearing to offend him, Ly did exactly the same by muttering :

"My profound salutations to you, O God of Boxing !"

Ro gave a kick in the air, saying :

"A terrible kick in the air."

Ly did the same, thinking it was part of the lesson itself.

Then Ro cast a grave look at his cousin, calmly showed her a chair and said :

"Shove yourself under the chair".

Ly looked at Ro anxiously to see how the lesson would come to its end.

"Look, make haste. Shove your head under the chair, I tell you. Or are you no longer willing to learn ?"

"What ? To put my head under the chair ? But what for.?"

Ro pretended to take offence.

"Obey me and you'll understand. If you delay I'll give you up."

Ly had to obey. Ro shouted aloud :

"Let your adversaries fall upon you, poor girl !"

This provoked a roar of laughter. The young men held their sides. Blushing with confusion and fury at having been made game of, Ly punched her cousin on the back and shouted :

"Little devil, off with you !"

Then she ran away, filled with shame at being fooled like a child.

* * *

To reinforce the control of the highway, the enemy in February 1961 set up a small post about three hundred metres from Ly's home and sent six "dan ve" (civil guards) to guard it.

Right in the first days, these fellows began showing their cruelty by molesting four peasants and arresting three others. It was evident that their aim was to suppress the local revolutionary movement. They came out of their post only to hunt for women, threatening the wives of resistance workers regrouped in the North with all kinds of reprisals if they refused to serve as their concubines. Their behaviour provoked a strong protest from the women in the village. After failing to reach their goal by threats, they resorted to violence, committing numerous rapes. The whole population groaned under their grip.

Just at the moment when the post was set up in the village Ly was admitted to the Party. Conscious that she had now been entrusted with new responsibilities she spent many sleepless nights thinking how to alleviate the suffering of the local people, and get rid of this post of An Binh. Having no experience in the matter, Ly racked her brain for a solution. The capture of a fort defended by modern arms was a much more difficult matter than organizing a successful ambush. How to make sure of victory when the guerillas had at their disposal only a few rusty rifles and grenades spoilt by the damp? But in any case they could not remain with folded arms. Each time she passed by the post and saw the militiamen look at her arrogantly she feft as if a thorn was sticking into her flesh. This damned post must be obliterated at any cost.

News came to her that at Da Phuoc Hoi, the guerillas had just mounted a successful attack on the local post and had captured valuable booty. The affair had succeeded thanks to clever use of the enemy's inadvertance. Could it be done here, too? Sure, it could. Only there must be careful preparations, Ly decided. She went to fetch the other members of her cell. The young men looked at her with amazement and said: We'll attack it, to be sure, but not now! How can we succeed with these rusty rifles?"

"If you wait until we've got good weapons, much water will have flowed under the bridge. I am of the opinion that we must follow the example of Da Phuoc Hoi and take the post by stratagem."

"But the people's morale there is better than ours here."

Ly made such a point of the matter that in the end they agreed to ask for the District Party's authorization.

In the meantime, Ly gathered information. She entrusted the little buffalo boys to make acquaintance with the militiamen and to play shuttle-cock or football in front of the post itself. Finally the militiamen joined the games themselves, leaving only one or two of their men on the watch tower.

Basing their opinion on Ly's daily reports, the cell decided that it was possible to attract all the militia out of the post. The Pary district committtee allowed the attack but only on the condition that the defenders should be lured away and attacked outside their fortifications.

After the buffalo boys it was the turn of the rat catchers. The militiamen, attracted by the hunt, followed the peasants in the pursuit of rats, had a drink with them but never completely abandoned the post.

One day, two guerillas brought the boa-constrictor domesticated by the commune in front of the post and drew a small gathering of the population. The militiamen also came to have a look at this local curiosity but one of them always remained on the watch-tower !

In spite of the failure of her successive stratagems Ly did not lose patience. Far from that. One day, a woman guerilla stopped before the post, pretending to ask her way of the militia on guard duty. Seeing the beautiful girl, all the militiamen went out to the gate to offer her their service. Noticing this, an idea flashed through Ly's mind and she went to report to the cell that she had at last found the way to do away with the militiamen.

"What will you do ?"

"I am told that the guerilla woman Tuyet in Da Phuoc Hoi has had a lot of experiences. I propose that she be invited here together with some others to help us. I and Tuyet will try our best to attract the militiamen out. Our comrades will only have to capture the post and the arms."

Ly also reported that she had succeeded in organizing numerous "self-defence" partisans living near the post. She had also warned the population of the imminent capture of the post by the liberation forces and told them that when the action took place all those who had their sons in the militia should go to Thom to demand that Phong, the chief of the district post, return their sons to them.

Faced with such a protest movement right after their failure, the enemy would have neither the time nor reason to take reprisals against the population.

Tuyet and two guerillas were sent from Da Phuoc Hoi to An Binh. Ly and two other comrades were assigned the task of making the attack a complete success. Tuyet was just 19 years old and from the very first took a great liking for Ly, her senior by four years. They agreed to confide in each other from that time on.

The men did not have much confidence in them but as it was necessary to draw the militiamen out, they were obliged to take them into their group. Before the operation each took the oath never to abandon a comrade on the field of battle and to fulfil at any cost the mission assigned to them.

On August 9, 1961 three defenders of the post were out for a walk. Between the walls surrounding the post a young peasant arrested on the previous night was doing his forced labour by cutting grass. Ly and Tuyet approached and asked a militiaman with a smile :

"Where are all your comrades, Mister Militiaman ? The post seems quite deserted today."

Flattered by this greeting the militiaman came out of the inner enclosure and came over to the two young girls by the outer wall.

"There are only three of us at home ; the others have gone out," he said, pointing with his finger at the other two militiamen who, attracted by the beautiful girls, were hurrying toward the group while eyeing each other significantly. None of them had thought of taking his gun with him.

One of them began flirting at once .

"We are no gentlemen ; you can be more friendly to us ! You may even call us by our names."

All three broke into laughter at this witty overture. Ly replied with a smile :

"People have called you gentlemen out of habit. But we can call you by your names if you so wish. Really, you have been spoiled by your idleness. You have nothing to do here except to eat and grow fat !"

"What ? nothing to do ?"

Ly pointed to the young prisoner .

"See for yourselves. Even to cut the grass you have to rely on others ! Take a scythe and work it a little to see if you are really capable of any work !"

The two new comers, pricked by this challenge, went to the young man to show their know-how while the other stayed beside the young girls. All this time the three militiamen were being drawn away from the wall. To get back to the post and take up their arms they would have had to run a fair distance along the wall.

Ly felt her heart pound with emotion.

"They are caught this time for sure", she told herself.

"Our men have only to break into the post and even if they had wings the militiamen could not catch up with them !"

The guerillas turned up on the road, the group leader having a pistol hidden under his jacket. Ly signalled to them with her eyes and made gestures behind her back while continuing to speak and laugh with the mercenaries.

The guerillas looked at the empty post, hesitated a while, then walked away.

The whole thing was spoiled. Ly and Tuyet felt as if they were wet with perspiration. They nevertheless contained their emotion and invited the mercenaries to come and drink tea at a nearby inn. But the mercenaries declined the invitation for fear of leaving the post defenceless. The two guerilla women were obliged to take leave and go away.

They walked without a word, sick at heart. The men had missed an opportunity they had been looking for more than one month ! When they met the girls blamed them for their lack of resolution. Ly did not weep out loud, yet silent tears streamed down her cheeks. The group leader explained :

"As you were there, we feared for you..."

"To morrow you'll draw them out and it is we who will attack !" Ly said, still angry.

She said it out of rage, but she knew that the men were quite incapable of such work. They set out to draw up a new plan.

One of the militiamen at the post named To lived with his father in the village itself. Ly went to see the old farmer :

"Tomorrow," she told him, "the liberation forces will attack the post. If you want to save the skin of your son, tell him not to resist."

The old man entreated her to give him the time to call his son back home before the attack.

"That's impossible !", said Ly. "In any case, don't let them know the plan. If they get wind of something, you will be held responsible."

The old man wept, not knowing how to save his son, so Ly continued :

"This is what you have to do. To-morrow bring some alcohol to your son and his friends. While they are regaling themselves, the liberation forces will break into the post. You have only to hold To's arm and tell him to give himself up. The others will follow his example. Then they will be saved."

As the old man was hesitating, Ly added :

"The liberation forces have decided to mount the attack. As for us, we only assist them. Your son has committed many crimes and everybody knows it. It is now or never to redeem his faults, otherwise he'll not escape punishment."

In the end the old man obeyed her.

Ly could not sleep for a moment all night. It had been agreed that she would run into the post together with Tuyet while two other guerillas waited in front. One comrade had told her half seriously, half jokingly :

"Never will you succeed ! Two women take an enemy post, that has never been seen before !"

Ly told herself : "I must make it succeed to show the men they shouldn't make mock of women ? But she was overwhelmed with anxiety. It would be much more serious this time than the ambushes and the tricks devised to lure the militiamen out of their post. If old Lu betrayed them or something accidental cropped up she might be killed. She remembered the sight of a peasant executed by the enemy. After his death, the hangman tied him to a pedicab and dragged him as far as Mo Cay. His body was practically flayed and the road was red with his blood. Ly shivered at the thought that she might also be treated in the same way. And what would become of her parents then ? For some time now she had somewhat neglected farm work. Her father had to handle the plough himself and her mother to replant the rice seedlings.

Ly wept bitterly... She recalled the day of her admission to the Party. She has taken the oath before the red flag : "I swear to devote myself completely to the service of the people and to be ready to sacrifice my last drop of blood."

Remembering how trustfully Bay, the secretary of the cell, had looked at her... she regained her calm before falling into a heavy slumber.

Next morning, Ly went to the market to buy some roasted pork and a bottle of anise which she gave to old Lu. As soon as three puppet troops had come out as usual, the old man brought the food to the post. Ly and Tuyet waited in a neighbouring house, trembling with excitement. The two other guerillas carried each a truss of straw hung to a bamboo pole. Two "Lebels" were hidden in the straw.

Old Lu called his son who was on guard duty on the watch tower. To came down and went with his father to the kitchen where the two other militiamen were preparing lunch. To hung his rifle on a nail, sat down on the plank bed and called the three others to share the meal. While they were gulping down meat and vermicelli, old Lu went out in the yard and taking off his kerchief, wiped his face. That was the sign agreed upon. Ly and Tuyet ran straight to the post as in a dream. There was nothing to fear, Ly told herself to take courage. She quickly climbed to the watchtower while Tuyet went to the kitchen and came behind Old Lu. The latter unfastened the rifle from the wall and handed it to the young girl while holding back To's arm :

"The liberation troops are there ! Give yourself up, son, I entreat you !"

To wrung himself free from his father before the amazed look of his mates. He wanted to pounce upon Tuyet when the latter lifted his carbine and pointed it at his chest :

"Hands up or you're a dead map"

Frightened, To and the two other militiamen raised their hands while mumbling :

"Have mercy on us ! We surrender ! We surrender !"

Old Lu entreated Tuyet :

"Spare them, miss us. They dare not resist !"

Meanwhile Ly had gathered up all the other weapons. The action took just eight minutes without anyone intervening.

Two groups of guerillas had been posted on the road to stop the traffic and prevent the news from spreading before their departure. The population acclaimed with joy the capture of three puppet troops and valuable booty.

"Have you seen them ? Such young girls and so courageous !"

Amid enthusiastic cheers, Ly and Tuyet handed over the prisoners and weapons to the guerillas who then allowed the traffic to continue as before. The passers-by looked with admiration at the young heroines.

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"Ly is marvellous for agitation work," one of them said. "But what is she worth in combat ?"

"Don't distrust me," Ly insisted. "You must have confidence in us. Anyway, it is you men who will bear the brunt of the affair, we have only to draw the mercenaries out and lend you a hand when necessary."

Endless discussions followed because without the women, there could be no way of luring the militiamen out.

"We can carry you away if you are wounded," said one of the men. "But can you do the same for us ?"

"Why not ? Let me try to carry you on my back ?" Ly replied.

Finally they had to accept the help of Ly and Tuyet.

On the following day, as one puppet soldier had gone out on leave, there remained at the post only five mllitiamen and the two women. Ly and Tuyet, dressed in their best, approached the post, each holding a basket as if she came from afar.

The militiamen and the two women were chatting with two underground guerillas in front of the post. The two young girls greeted them politely while gratifying the men with charming smiles. The militiamen winked at each other. Ly and Tuyet crossed the bridge, bought some sugar cane and invited the militiamen and the women :

"Would you come and share with us a bit of sugar cane, ladies and gentlemen."

The two underground guerillas whispered into the ears of the militiamen :

"They must come from Ben Tre, these two beautiful girls. Would you like to come along with us ? Such beauties are not often seen here, eh ?"

One of the militiamen followed the guerillas to the other side of the bridge. Ly gave him some sugar cane and said :

"Wait for me a minute, we'll go and serve the ladies and gentlemen on the other side."

The four militiamen and the two women had stopped at the end of the bridge Ly and Tuyet brought them some cane and

stayed there chatting a long while with them. On the road two guerillas showed up, a grenade and a pistol hidden in a big package of tobacco. Ly signalled to them secretly. Taking advantage of a moment's inattention of their interlocutors, the two young girls dashed into the post while one of the guerillas tossed a grenade into the group.

The militiamen cried in alarm, threw themselves on the ground so that none of them was wounded. They got up only to be seized round the waist by two guerillas who had just arrived on the scene. Tuyet, Ly and the two guerillas, once having broken into the post, blocked the gate.

In the scuffle one of the guerillas fired a pistol shot which missed the chief of the post and nearly hit the thigh of the other guerilla. Both managed, however, to let go of the mercenaries and join their comrades in the post.

The mercenaries threw themselves on the gate in an attempt to break through. The assailants became the assailed.

Leaving the four men to defend the gate, Ly and Tuyet ran straight to the arms. From the top of the watch-tower, Ly took a Thompson sub-machinegun and pointed it at the militiamen.

"Give yourselves up or I'll fire!"

She wanted to fire a warning round but the weapon was a complete mystery to her.

She toyed with the gun for some time before she managed by chance to lift the safety-catch and open fire. Tuyet came to her side with a carbine in her hands. With two barrels pointed at them, the militiamen could not but surrender. They were tied up and taken away in the twinkling of an eye. All the arms in the post were seized as booty.

The militiamen were furious at being duped by two young girls.

"And to think that I've been ten years in the army!" their chief did not cease to grumble between his teeth.

Ly was soon assigned by the command of the district. She took part in all the demonstrations in the district and province but generally refrained from demonstrating in her own village in order not to reveal her identity.

The mercenaries held her in high esteem because they believed she was wife to a high police official in Saigon. In a demonstration in the village, Ly went to see them. When they refused to accept a petition, she told them :

"You are not wise at all. You must accept the petition to please the population. You must hand it to the district chief and in this way they will like you without you losing anything because they will think you are working for the good of the people."

The militiamen finally accepted the petition and promised to hand it to their superiors.

Ly proved that she could never be intimidated in the demonstrations and that she was able to take quick and judicious decisions in face of difficulties. Once, in Ben Tre province, Cuc, a young woman leader of her village, was denounced and tracked down by the police. On hearing the news, Ly took her to the house of a sympathizer where she changed her clothes and became absolutely unrecognizable. She was then able to continue to lead the demonstration beside Ly until its complete victory.

The puppet chief of Mo Cay district, a certain Tan, was among the most bloodthirsty and Machiavellian hangmen. During a demonstration in front of his residence, he politely accepted the petition, sent away the old women but kept back in the stadium more than 800 young girls. People were still wondering what his intention was when militiamen were seen approaching with a dozen pairs of big tailor's scissors. Tan proclaimed loudly :

"There is no need to beat them. We'll have their hair cut today. In that way they'll not dare come out on demonstrations again."

Ly was among those held in the stadium. The victims resisted furiously, shouting, crying and wailing. The militiamen divided into groups of five, four holding one girl while the fifth quickly cut her locks with a single snip of scissors.

They did it with devilish glee varying the cuts to make the girl look ridiculous and prevent all repairs. Outside the old women grouped themselves and shouted out their protests. The din they created was beyond any description.

When her turn came, Ly calmly asked the mercenaries :

"Why are you treating us so offensively? We demonstrate against raids, pillages, brutalities and forcible conscription. Is that a fault? What will you do if your wives and sisters face the same situation?

The militiamen finally let go of Ly and released her and eight others. But all the rest had had their hair cut. Their hair was heaped in a corner of the stadium.

The operation having terminated, the young girls demonstrated bare-headed in the streets of Mo Cay, then in Ben Tre, and in Saigon.

Everywhere the population supported the demonstrators and brought them food. The affair aroused such strong protests that the puppet administration had to transfer the hangman Tan elsewhere.

An Binh post which was attacked in September of the previous year was reoccupied by seven militiamen who were as cruel as the others. They were strictly prohibited from fraternizing with the local population. Day and night they mounted a vigilant guard.

Once again Ly was entrusted with capturing the post. She spent several months training seven guerillas, five of whom were women, charged with studying minutely the routine of the post and warning her of the slightest change. She soon learnt that the garrison was divided into two rival groups which frequently quarrelled among themselves. Everyday, three of the guards would go to Thom market.

In vain did their superiors forbid them to make contact with the people. Little by little the five guerillas succeeded in making

acquaintance with the mercenaries who came from time to time to them to drink tea. The women guerillas availed themselves of these visits to provoke their jealousy of one another.

On April 3, 1962, the Party members holding a meeting in the presence of one of the district Party representatives when a woman guerilla came in and informed them that following a violent quarrel, three militiamen had left while two others had gone to Mo Cay to supply themselves with munitions, so that there remained only the chief of the post and another militiaman at home. The meeting decided to capture the post that very day.

Ly immediately went to the place together with four other guerillas divided in two groups. The first group composed of Ly and a peasant armed with a hammer would stay in a hut about one hundred metres from the post. The second made up of three unarmed men would enter another house some thirty metres away. Ly sent a woman guerilla to the post to invite the two militiamen to come and have some tea at her house. The mercenaries declined the invitation. As the woman guerilla was very pressing, the chief of the post went out to the gate but refused to go any further.

In her observation post Ly was boiling with impatience. Her heart was filled with hope and disappointment from one minute to the next. Seeing the woman guerilla speak a long while with the chief of the post she thought her plan had materialized. But he turned in after having smiled at the girl. Ly let out a big sigh of despair. Time was pressing! If the others came back at this moment, the occasion would be lost for good. Fortunately the chief of the post came out again and ventured a look at the house of the woman guerilla. He was apparently tempted by such a gracious invitation. Moreover, what a relief it would be for him after the quarrel had upset him so much!

The militiaman on guard duty was always on the watchtower. It was impossible to attract him down. Ly gathered both groups and proposed that they should attack at any rate.

"But we decided just now to attack the post only when both militiamen go out !"

"Yes, it was so decided, but the situation has changed ; we must adapt ourselves to the circumstances. I propose that we draw the chief of the post out and go into action without waiting any longer as soon as the other sentry has left his watchtower.

"That's too risky. We have no weapons in our hands. If we fail, we shall be held responsible for having disobeyed the decision of the Party cell."

"I am a group leader, I will take the entire responsibility before the Party. Believe me, we can try this coup with a big chance of success. I am ready to accept myself all disciplinary measures. The essential thing now is to liquidate the post."

The guerilla armed with a hammer asked :

"Who will attack first ?"

"I," Ly said. "Let me be the first to enter the post."

"And what if the sentry fire on you from above ?"

"That's out of question. As soon as their chief has gone out, I'll run to the gate. When he sees a girl rushing into the post he won't fire. I'll take hold of him and prevent him from firing. You'll have enough time to arrive."

They finally agreed with Ly who added that if she was killed, they must not risk other lives by seeking to remove her body. To increase the chance of success, they decided to bring before the gate a monkey whose pranks might attract the chief of the post out.

While awaiting the arrival of the animal, Ly and her group peacefully sipped their tea. From time to time she cast a look at the post. Seeing the chief of the post come out to the gate, then turn back instantly, she was seized by intense joy followed by profound disappointment. She remained calm but only outwardly because this time, high risks were in store for her. It would be no easy job to wrestle with a man twice as tall as herself. Moreover, she might very well be killed at her first step

inside the post. Her parents would be deeply grieved at her death. And her brothers, what would they say when they returned from the North ?

Before her eyes the post stood like a horrible monster. It had to be wiped out so as to end the suffering inflicted on her people by men in the pay of the enemy. There was no other means. It was her first duty as a Party member. Even if she were killed, she would have created an opportunity for the capture of the post. And, of course, her brother Ut would know how to console her parents.

While they were impatiently waiting for the arrival of the monkey, the chief of the post who apparently could not resist the temptation of the tea, walked over in the direction of the house of the woman guerilla who had invited him. Meantime the sentry had also come down from the watch-tower without carrying his gun. "Now or never !" Ly and the guerilla with the hammer darted like two arrows toward the post, the girl running a dozen metres ahead. The chief of the post asked in surprise :

"What's the matter ? Where are you running to ? Stop !"

Ly did not take the trouble to answer. The man was about to pursue her when the guerilla arrived with his hammer. Frightened, he took to his heels and made a non-stop flight toward Thom as soon as the guerilla began to chase after him.

In the post, the militiaman was washing his face when Ly showed up.

"Where are you going," he asked, flabbergasted.

"Give yourself up, the liberation men are arriving !"

He took Ly by both arms :

"Nonsense !"

"I swear it is true ! Release me ! I simply wanted to save you ! Release me or they will not spare you !"

She succeeded in wringing one hand free after violent contortions :

"Kill him, comrades !" she shouted.

The man struck hard at her face and chest. She returned the blows while continuing to shout as nobody arrived. Where were the men of the second group? If they were there, what a rare chance for them to climb to the watch-tower and seize the arms!

What if the militiamen came back? Ly gave her adversary a powerful kick in the groin which made him double up with pain. Before he could stand up again she freed herself from his hold jumped over his head and sent him flat on the ground with another kick on his back. She quickly scanned the kitchen, not a single firearm there. She then ran toward the watchtower. Hardly had she made a few steps on the ladder than she was caught by the militiaman. Her jacket was ripped from top to bottom. The man caught her legs and tried to pull her down. Ly shouted:

"There you are at last! Kill him, comrades."

The militiaman turned round. Ly availed herself of this moment to mount higher. She was again caught by her legs. Clenching her teeth and gathering all her strength she drove her leg into the man's face which made him let go of her. At the top of the watchtower at last she seized a gun and point it at the militiaman:

"Do you surrender now?"

The militiaman who was now half way up the ladder, stepped back, muttering:

"Mercy! I surrender, I surrender!"

"You don't deserve any mercy!"

The militiaman had in fact hurt her badly. She spit blood. The man saw it and was seized by frignt. Ly clenched her teeth and raised her gun.

"Have pity, sister! Forgive me! I'll never forget it!"

Seeing the militiaman entreating her so earnestly Ly hesitated. "No!" she thought, "in spite of his stubborn resistance the man had given himself up, we should not kill him. He must be allowed to live on and show his gratitude toward the revolution."

"Well! Hands up and keep quiet! If you budge I'll send a bullet into your body."

Ly wanted to capture the arms but there were seven guns in all and a lot of hand grenades, too. She was still wondering what to do next when the guerilla with the hammer arrived, to be soon joined by all the guerillas of the second group.

When they saw someone on the watch-tower they had thought the wife of a militiaman had gone up there and that the coup had failed; hence their delay.

Ly called out to them:

"Come and take the arms!"

The first to come asked the militiaman:

"Do you surrender?"

"I've given myself up to the sister above, gentlemen!"

Unfolding his turban, the guerilla used it to tie the man's hands.

Ly and her group came out triumphantly. Numerous witnesses gave them a long ovation when they saw the number of weapons captured. The prisoner submissively followed behind the guerillas. The turban round his hands had fallen, nobody knew when. While running he hesitated a second looking toward Thom then resumed his run.

Ly suddenly remembered him and perceived that he was running with his hands completely free.

"Why didn't you tie his hands?"

"Why? I did tie them with my turban?"

The captive said timidly to Ly:

"The gentlemen forgot to make a knot."

The guerilla recognized his negligence and smiled confusedly. Ly asked him:

"Where is your hammer?"

The hammer had disappeared ! In his hurry to take the rifles the man had left in on the watch-tower. Everyone laughed heartily on seeing his sheepish air which overwhelmed him with confusion.

After handing over the arms and the prisoner to her comrades, Ly changed and rode on a bicycle to Thom market. About 200m from the post, the wife of the captured militiaman, eight months with child, had met Phong and was asking the chief of the post to give her husband back to her.

"Go and ask the Vietcong for him," Phong snapped back. "He is a traitor, he has handed the post over to the enemy !"

Before the woman had time to retort, the hangman fired a shot at her chest. She fell on her back in a pool of blood and died. Phong and his escort walked away without showing the least sign of emotion.

Ly was revolted at this cold-blooded murder. At Thom market, she recounted the incident to all her acquaintances. The population, accompanied by the families of militiamen, immediately held a demonstration to protest against this gratuitous murder. Phong, greatly frightened by the mass action,, slipped away.

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The enemy sent their troops to occupy An Binh post for the third time.

Ly and her comrades knew that it was necessary to do away with the Thom post if the An Binh post was to be liquidated for good.

But Thom was guarded by as many as 21 militiamen.

For seven months, the group of girls carried out active agitation work among the enemy ranks. Two militiamen offered their services in case the post was attacked.

Before the action took place, Ly had the honour of being invited to the Congress of Guerillas in South Vietnam.

At the very moment when she was reporting to the Congress her successes in the armed struggle, political struggle and agitation among the puppet troops, an exultant message came to her. On January 9, 1964, within a quarter of an hour, the group composed of 9 women guerillas entirely trained by Ly had captured the Thom post with the help of the two militiamen Quoi and Ky Nam.

The Congress gave a prolonged ovation to the heroic girl of Ben Tre province.